



**Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References
Committee Inquiry into:**

**‘Opportunities for advancing Australia’s strategic
interests through existing regional architecture’**

Navy League of Australia Submission

June 2021

Organisation background

The Navy League was established in Australia in 1900, initially in the form of small branches of the United Kingdom Navy League (established in 1897) and since 1950 as an autonomous national body headed by a Federal Council consisting of a Federal President and representatives of the six States, the Australian Capital Territory and the Northern Territory.

The Navy League of Australia is now one of a number of independent Navy Leagues formed in countries of the free world to influence public thinking on maritime matters and create interest in the sea.

The Navy League is intent upon keeping before the Australian people the fact that we are a maritime nation and that a strong Navy and capable maritime industry are elements of our national wellbeing and vital to the freedom of Australia. The League seeks to promote Defence self-reliance by actively supporting defence manufacturing, and the shipping and transport industries.

The strategic background to Australia's security is changing and, in many respects, has become much less certain following increasing tensions in East Asia, Europe and the Middle East. The League believes that Australia should rapidly increase the capability to defend itself, paying particular attention to maritime defence. Through geographical necessity Australia's prosperity, strength, and safety depend to a great extent upon the security of the surrounding seas and island areas, and on unrestricted seaborne trade.

The League's policy statement can be found at: [League Policy – Navy League of Australia](#)

Submission

The current security dialogue architecture for Australia's engagement with the South West Pacific is adequate, but needs a physical symbol to act as a foundation and reminder of the commitment Australia has to the region. This submission will concentrate on the South West Pacific region.

In World War II the Japanese saw the strategic value of the South West Pacific as a key vulnerability to Australia's links with the U.S. and sought to control much of this area. China is without doubt viewing this region and coming to a similar appreciation to World War II Japan. Thus, this region's stability and security is vital to Australia and its ability to promote democracy, the rule of law, and maintain our values and the fruits of our centuries old labour.

The recent initiative to reinvigorate the Pacific Patrol Boat programme through the Guardian Class Patrol Boat Project, and the announcement of a Pacific Support Vessel, is a great testament to our belief in the value of the relationship with the South West Pacific nations, and guarantees our seat at the security dialogue table. However, the ship reportedly being considered for the support vessel capability is potentially inadequate for the task, and risks being seen as nothing more than a token gesture.

Australia should be looking to a similar capability employed by the U.S. Government in the ships USNS MERCY and COMFORT, which fulfil a comparable role as being sought by the Pacific Support Vessel. A hybrid of this would be quite appropriate for Australia and the region's needs.

As an example, the recent COVID-19 pandemic would have provided an ideal opportunity for Australia to support the region's health security through this ship visiting ports and either caring for sufferers and later through mass immunisation.

USNS MERCY and COMFORT

The U.S. ships MERCY and COMFORT are well received around the world and act as a powerful statement of U.S. Government engagement in areas of disaster and impoverishment. They make a great example/template for Australia to employ as a foundation to advancing Australia's strategic goals and engagement in our region through a Pacific Support Vessel.

Primary Mission

- Hospital ship for naval amphibious task forces and battle forces afloat.

Secondary Mission

- To provide mobile surgical hospital service for use by appropriate U.S. Government agencies in disaster or humanitarian relief or limited humanitarian care incident to these missions or peacetime military operations.



USNS MERCY in Dilli Harbour, East Timor. (USN)

An Australian Capability

To fulfill the role effectively and give structure to the regional security 'architecture' our Pacific Support Vessel will need the following capabilities (but not limited to):

1. Ability to provide a hospital with state-of-the-art surgical operating theatre, full Xray capability and dental.
2. Carry disaster relief vehicles and stores (bulldozers, grader, front end loaders, cranes, ambulances, water trucks, fuel trucks, water purification vehicle, bridge laying etc) plus personal to operate and maintain for extended periods
3. Ability to deploy disaster relief capability via landing craft over the beach or by crane on undeveloped wharfs and/or own Mexeflote
4. Helicopter landing and hangar/support for two helicopters with pad large enough for a CH-47 Chinook
5. Limited deployed hydrographic survey capability
6. Ability to conduct port/wharf repair
7. Workshop
8. Extensive back to Australia communications equipment including Link-16 and ability to provide free internet connection for those within range of the ship (once registered) and/or mobile phone coverage

9. 'Fitted for but not with' defensive systems such as Phalanx and medium calibre guns, should the situation require it
10. Advanced air and surface surveillance capability with air traffic control function
11. Large HQ capability for disaster relief staff and for military contingency ops if needed
12. Ability to refuel at sea from Naval logistics ships, and fuel and provision others such as Guardian class patrol boats while alongside
13. Ability to accommodate 350 civilians for at least 1 week
14. Ship to be capable of 300-day deployments to numerous South West Pacific Ports

Secondary role for this capability would be as an Australian Defence Force hospital ship and deployed/afloat HQ asset.

A good exemplar capability that could fulfill these missions currently resides in the RAN in the form of the amphibious support ship HMAS CHOULES. Conversion work on CHOULES for the new mission would be carried out in Australia, which is positive for our shipbuilding industry. A consequence though could be the multi-role sealift ship project to replace the CHOULES capability needing to be brought forward, if Defence was hesitant on timeframes required to convert CHOULES back to her original configuration/role in times of conflict.

Additional measures to consider:

- Red, White, Green & Blue stripes across HMAS CHOULES's middle with Australian Flags painted on the superstructure (indicating a government ship rather than a military unit).
- Ship's Commanding Officer should be an experienced RAN Captain – preferably with overseas diplomatic mission experience
- Second in command/executive officer; a Master Mariner (Australian Public Service -APS)
- Navigator; Navy Lieutenant Commander
- Disaster relief engineering capability; Army Major
- Interagency staff (ABF, Customs, fisheries, AUSTRADE, DFAT, FEDPOL etc)
- Mixed civilian (APS) crew and Navy

The Hospital capability on the Pacific Support Vessel/CHOULES+ is a primary Raison d'être for the ship. Thus, it should contain the following:

- Intensive care ward
- Recovery ward
- Infectious disease isolation ward
- Intermediate care wards
- Light care wards
- Total patient capacity: 35+ beds
- Operating room

Facilities:

- Casualty reception
- Radiological services including CT
- Main laboratory plus satellite lab
- Central sterile processing
- Medical supply/pharmacy
- Physical therapy and burn care
- Intensive care unit
- Dental services
- Optometry/lens lab
- Morgue

- Laundry
- Burn treatment
- Angiography
- Blood bank
- Oxygen producing plant



HMAS CHOULES arriving at Garden Island, Sydney. CHOULES is almost tailor made for the Pacific Support Vessel role. (RAN)

China

If Australia does not employ a similar style of USNS MERCY capability in its proposed Pacific Support Vessel, through the modification of HMAS CHOULES, or by other means, then China certainly will.

Nations requesting or receiving Chinese mercy ship support will be vulnerable to soft power coercion and influence at Australia's expense. If this is allowed to occur, the existing security dialogue architecture for the South West Pacific will be worth very little, and potentially cost more to re-establish than the cost of the token vessel currently planned.

Establishing Trust

In 2013, United States Marine Corps Commandant General James Amos encapsulated the importance of presence through maritime means when he said at the U.S Navy League's Sea-Air-Space Exposition "... presence matters, we (the sea services, particularly) are the stabilising force" to "build partnership, built trust" in a region. Because "**You can't surge trust.**"

The Pacific Support Vessel, and its ability to establish trust through effective presence is thus a vital foundation to the security architecture of the South West Pacific. It needs greater attention.

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